just about his success. Before the revolution, he had to steal flour from the mill to feed his starving mother. As a child, he once had to walk forty kilometers without even a taste of bread.[640] I do believe this: Lenin and Stalin saved him.

SELF-DEFENSE OF CLASS

Back to 1917, or maybe even 1918. No matter. At some point, the countess and the clay eater would have had to meet. Liberty meets equality.

Suppose that in the threatening days after tsardom dies, the clay eater, still skinny and shy, enrolls in a Committee of Unwealthy Peasants. The taunting crowd smashes down the gate. They insult the countess and steal her cloak, her fur coat, her wedding ring. She weeps. Later on, at school, the clay eater will come to appreciate culture—not just Party culture, but Beethoven, for instance, who "made of me a victorious warrior on the battlefield of life" with "his optimistic revolutionary overture."[641] But when a lecturer on Heine tells the audience that the German's poems moved her to tears in her very sleep, the clay eater thinks, "This is indeed the sobbing of a sick soul, one that is familiar to me. Her crying is tender, dainty and high-pitched, but that made me dislike it even more."[642] Wouldn't that be how the countess's sobbing made him feel?

I said that Ostrovsky would have loved this young man, who told his diary:

> It is my fate to take cruel action against those who stand in my way. There is no opposing force of personality that would not be mercilessly destroyed by me. No sooner do I sense the presence of an oppressive force than it is doomed to perish. My view of the world is triumphant. I gain universal respect through both my modesty and my fairness even to those cast down by me.[643]

What could "fairness" possibly consist of in this encounter between classes? What does fairness imply? Self-criticism sessions and show trials exemplified it: the cast-down ones had to denounce themselves in order to validate the acts of their new oppressors. Our shock worker, our clay-eater, wanted to have it both ways. He wanted to impose his will on the masses. But he also wanted them to agree that he was right—and more, incredibly enough. Here he is as brigade leader of a ballroom dancing class: "And with that powerful force of respect of the group I can confidently, boldly force those guilty parties to love me."[644] Would our countess have been able to love him? Moreover, would that have saved her?

Her moral dilemma was obvious. Her expedient dilemma was this: Denounce oneself in the hope of mercy from the self-styled merciless, and risk liquidation on account of open guilt. Plead innocent, and risk liquidation as a secret class enemy.

Imagine, if you care to, the countess and her children huddled in the sitting room behind boarded up windows, praying, frantically kissing their silver icons,

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while the count strides out with loaded rifle to die defending their home from the mob. Imagine our future shockworker, the hungry boy, whose teeth are still bluish-grey with clay, running in the vanguard of these radicalized peasants, the tines of his pitchfork aimed at the count's chest. A demobilized soldier[645] shouts out: "If you destroy the wolves' nests, you must strangle the wolves, too." Everybody shouts approval. Now the clay-eater is almost upon the count. Two pairs of eyes gaze upon each other, shining with hatred and resolution. Does the count now fire, or does he hesitate, afraid to inflame them against his family once he is gone? Does the clay-eater feel pity? Do the two kopeks which the countess once put into his hand soften him a little, or inflame him? Who is to blame? There can be but one definition of this confrontation: Tragedy.

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